

## February 07, 2006- Rahall: Republican Budget Leaves Some of Our Brave Veterans Out In The Cold

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WASHINGTON, DC - U.S. Rep. Nick J. Rahall (D-WV) expressed frustration with the newly released Republican budget and how it affects veterans. "Once again, the Republican leadership is trying to categorize our veterans into different groups, some of which get better benefits than others," Rahall said. "We should treat our veterans equally and fairly-it's the least we can do to honor their service."

The budget, released this week, again proposes to charge an annual \$250 health care enrollment fee to veterans whose incomes are above certain levels and who have no illnesses or injuries that resulted from their military service. For the same veterans, the budget calls for increased co-payments for a 30-day supply of prescription drugs from \$8 to \$15. Congress has rejected both proposals three years in a row.

"The Administration talks a lot about helping our veterans, but over and over again they present us with proposals that are offensive to every veteran in America," Rahall said. "You don't thank veterans for their service by telling them, 'We're sorry, but if you need healthcare, we're going to need you to dig a little deeper into your wallet.'"

According to the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, Democratic Office, 200,000 veterans are predicted to forego enrolling in the VA healthcare system if these new fees and co-payments are instated. This is in addition to the 260,000 veterans who have not been given access since the VA established stricter guidelines in 2003, states the Democratic Office of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs.

American Legion National Commander Thomas L. Bock agrees that the new enrollment fees are bad news for veterans, saying the fees will "drive 1.2 million veterans out of the system created specifically for them."

"This budget request indeed has glitter," Bock said. "But I am not yet sure how much of it is gold. It is a budget request that appears to table long-needed construction dollars, particularly in the area of grants for state veterans homes and leaves CARES (Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services) under-funded again. It takes a \$13 million bite out of VA research. It also fails to provide sufficient funds for staffing and training in the Veterans Benefits Administration to address a claims backlog fast approaching one million."

The commander reiterated that he cannot accept a budget that deliberately aims to send more than one million veterans out of the VA system in search of health care elsewhere.

The Tri-State Veterans Committee for Civic Improvement in Huntington echoed the commander's sentiments in a recent letter thanking Rahall for his concern regarding adequate funding of veterans' healthcare.

"With the War in Afghanistan and Iraq causing many severely disabled veterans, it is essential that the veterans' health care and other veterans' benefits be protected from being reduced and ignored. It is important that all veterans and the families of veterans, who make a sacrifice to fight a war, be properly cared for by their government," Richard Bohnke, chair of the organization, wrote.

The Administration's budget proposal come on the heels of a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report which finds that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has been using unproven management efficiencies to budget for the VA health care system.

According to the report, the management efficiency savings assumed in these requests were savings goals used to reduce requests for a higher level of annual appropriations in order to fill the gap between the cost associated with VA's projected demand for health care services and the amount the President was willing to request.

"As we start the appropriations process this year, I hope my colleagues will keep in mind these recent GAO findings and remember how important it is that we base the VA's budget on real needs, not fuzzy math," Rahall said.